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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 000809

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DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/09/2028

TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER SNAR CO VE

SUBJECT: CHAVEZ URGES FARC TO RELEASE HOSTAGES, LAY DOWN
ARMS

Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR VERONICA TORRES
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (SBU) President Chavez called on the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) to release all hostages and end its armed struggle against the government of Colombia. Chavez's remarks are a dramatic shift in his public statements towards the FARC given that the Venezuelan president recently advocated that it be recognized as a legitimate resistance group and not a terrorist organization. Speaking during his "Alo, President," television program on June 8, Chavez pressed new FARC leader Alfonso Cano to free all persons held by the FARC "in exchange for nothing." Chavez argued the release would serve as a "grand humanitarian gesture," and could be the first step towards ending the civil conflict in Colombia.

¶2. (SBU) While Chavez has previously pushed the FARC to release hostages, this was the first time he explicitly urged it to lay down arms. In fact, he called for a moment of silence after the death of former FARC Commander Raul Reyes and mobilized troops to the Colombian border. In his June 8 statements, however, Chavez asserted, "Enough is enough, the time has come (to end the conflict)." He went on to say, "The era of armed guerrilla struggle in Latin America has passed." The local media is also giving extensive press coverage to remarks by Colombian government officials who expressed surprise over Chavez's statements, but echoed the call for the FARC to end its armed struggle.

¶3. (C) Comment. It is not clear whether Chavez's public statements mean any shift in actual policy towards the FARC or its new leadership. It is significant, however, that Chavez, the FARC's most outspoken international ally, has retracted his support, particularly at a time when the FARC has suffered a series of heavy losses. President Chavez has been under growing international and national criticism for his public statements of support toward the FARC, as well as for his new intelligence law (Septel). Chavez's remarks are likely meant to try to boost his regional and international standing as a peacemaker. This surprising move also represents an attempt to distance the Venezuelan government from allegations that it has provided logistical assistance to the FARC, and the recent capture of a Venezuelan military official accused of transferring munitions to the armed group. End Comment.

Downes